



It was Him or Me....

American

Viet Cong

After You, I Insist

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Too many years to think and wonder
why I lived and you died.

I don't think we planned it to happen;
it's just that we suddenly *were there*
and suddenly I fired and you did not.

I wonder why?

You were alone.
I was on point.

Unexpected. But that is silly
considering the fact we were only
there because of the war and
searching each other out.

Still,
I knew you could be there,
but you had never *just appeared*
like a sudden slap.

*If I could undo it ...
If I could be certain you would
never kill my friends, and
If I could believe you,
I think I would undo it all.
I've wished for that so many
sleepless nights.*

I've seen you fall...
blown backwards really,
and not get up nor
breathe again.
Too many holes to even
think of trying to stop your
life draining away, even if I had
wanted to.

... and I didn't.

Your Poem Called to me.

I was not alone that night. Nearby were comrades at rest in the tunnels. My leader knew my dislike for the tunnels and sometimes sent me out to check for movements of the enemy. Rarely did you venture nearby at night.

Below ground, I felt confined like a worm crawling about, breathing heavy *earth-air*, stench of unwashed men, and suppressing a growing fear: *only the dead are meant to be buried alive, like this.*

In some narrower branches I porpoised-forward or scooted like an earthworm. It was necessary, so that you could not follow.
You would not have wanted to catch me there.

I had left the stagnant dampness below, inhaled the night air and found the scent of ocean bay fresh and uplifting. A short walk brought me to my favorite place where I could forget the oppressive tunnels. From a palm laden vista, the valley was like the cupped hands of a giant, and I watched as moonlight spilled into the ocean. I could see the distant Air Base we sometimes attacked, and of comrades who did not return.

I could watch as stars fell from the night, like the firebirds they were, landing gracefully as others silently lifted on roman-candles for fun -- stars reborn anew.

Flashes of a distant storm tap randomly, like my leader's typewriter, and silhouetted mountains. Clouds snug against lower hills glowed as if heat-lightning flashed within. I knew my comrades below could feel the earth tremor, and some could even guess the direction and distance of the bombs.

I pushed those thoughts away. *Why did I think of the war while up here, and the hidden valley while down there?*

If the night was clear;

if the moon was full and glowed the earth in silver;

if the clouds were like drifting balls of cotton;

then I could imagine the cloud-shadows' game of chase as they slid

Your spirit fled so fast and
your eyes took on that look only dead
eyes can acquire to mock the irony of life...
and so easily give up the ghost without
any fight to live.

No 'by your leave' ...
No 'sorry'bout the mess' ...
No 'deal with it.'
Just ... gone.
Checked out.

Did God see you fall, like a sparrow, that day?
Did He care?

Pats on my back...
defensive laughter...
cursing your body and believe me,
many did that.

Going through your stuff,
discarding photos with rude
remarks.

Posed photos ... as if you were a
hunting trophy.
I could not bring myself
to throw mine away after
all these years. Until finally,
I realized my eyes looked more
and more like yours. So I left
your crinkled black'n white soul
at a Buddhist temple in LA.

They were scared and I was terrified at what
just happened to you -- what had *just happened* to me.
And for the first time I wondered: Why You... Why Not Me?

How easily I had fired in reflex, and how
easily you fell, just like the movies, and
I, *oh how easily*, just walked away,
heart pounding, forced grin ... macho,
forever changed.

Better you than me,
so I've told myself Lord knows
how many times.

Would you have felt the same?
Would you have still wondered why?

What the hell were you doing out there alone?

down hillsides into the valley, skipping through an abandoned village
and waft off to wherever cloud-shadows played.

I admit that my thoughts were of home more so than the enemy: my
quiet village and cooking fires; grandfather; mother and my younger
brothers and sisters at play. And yes ... I had fallen asleep for a while
and dreamt of *Dao*, and our last moments together.

It was time to return to the tunnels and report what I had observed of
the enemy to the leader, who would nod wisely and know that I would
be a good earthworm for another day.

I inhaled deeply, savoring life above, and felt melancholy walking
back.

Within a few yards of the entrance I sensed a *presence* and suddenly
we were before each other like eclipsing clouds. I squinted trying to
identify *friend or foe* and felt a stabbing flash of light flick the trail
green... and cast a pale moonlight-shadow as I fell to earth.

Unable to move, I wondered: *Why Me... Why Not You?* and indifferently
watched a growing-glistening black pool of life beneath me fade to
nothing.

My spirit was drawn to voices in the abandoned village.
Elders, like mist, tended fires and listened to the needs of the living.

I have not revisited the tunnels... but often see the silver tinted valley
at night. Stars do not rise and fall now, nor does the earth quake from
distant thunder.

No, I do not wonder about what happened that night.
I accept what happened. *Can you?*

Let go for this one night, and I will show you my valley and a new way
to dream.

If the moon is full and paints the valley silver;

If clouds are sliding down hillsides like children playing;

Then we may yet hear their gleeful laughter drifting in the night.

Our paths will have eclipsed once more through our dream

-- *no one will die* --

and with the dawn, we will feel at peace.

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